

## De Zoysa Maternity Home - 125 Years

We meet here today to celebrate the founding of this De Zoysa Maternity Home by a very great philanthropist of our country one hundred and twenty-five years ago. It is a long time, forty-two years before even an octogenarian like me was born. Let me begin by expressing our deep sense of gratitude and our honest admiration of his magnanimity and generosity, in making such a gift as this to a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Sri Lankan community. He is no doubt a part of this vast complex but is seen rising well above differences. This gift continues to serve the nation in giving birth, literally, to generations of men and women, who if we do collect the statistics, would be seen serving this land bounteously in diverse capacities.

Maternity homes on the whole are places where gifted pregnant mothers courageously disburden themselves with ease and comfort. It is our belief that it is even more important that they behold in the birth of their children the glory and the grandeur of their blessed family lives. We wish this to be more than a prayer and an expectation. We know that these maternity homes accommodate a very wide range of pregnant mothers who come from many parts of the country, both rural and urban. They also perhaps reflect diverse social and economic levels of homes from where they come.

All of us in this country must remember that these maternity homes need to be more adequately rigged, with both appropriate personnel and equipment, to be able to receive with warmth and affection these would be mothers, not only when they come to have their babies delivered, but also on their very first visits for pre-natal care. The cordiality of this first reception, we firmly believe, goes a long way in a sensible process of nation building. Let us all contribute towards it.

We wish to look upon pregnancy as the elevation of a woman to the exalted position she deserves within the family. As the Buddha has wisely remarked, she

as the mother, is going to be **the Friend in the Home: *mātā mittam sake ghare***. Pre-delivery psychic or mental growth of the child needs a great deal more attention.

We Buddhists in this country have a message to give to the nation, nay to the world at large, on this subject of pre-natal care. Buddhist texts know about the attention a young mother should receive on her being discovered pregnant. We know this pre-natal care very well, under the name *gabba-parihāra*. Sinhala villagers even today know this under the name *gaeb perahaera*. Please note that there is nothing magical or mysterious about this. This is nothing for the village astrologer or the witch-doctor. Take care to keep them at a respectable distance.

This is essentially the extra care the home must provide for the pregnant girl. She normally returns home to her parents to go through her pregnancy. Every one in the home from the husband downwards, which must include her own parents and her in-law parents as well as brothers and sisters, must learn to respect and treat with due care the pregnant girl for the new role she has taken upon her self as the would be mother. Her food, her rest and relaxation, her security against any form of accidents are all part of the responsibility of the entire household. This is what we have done in our own lives in the home, as young brothers and later in life as husbands, with all the love we could bestow.

On the religious side, Buddhism offers ample opportunity for pregnancy care. The Angulimāla sutta which comes down in the Buddhist texts [MN. II. 103] as given by the Buddha himself, epitomizes this. It is a little chant of only eighteen Pali words which in our English translation runs into thirty-five words. In it, Angulimala who is an erstwhile murderer, confesses with incredible honesty, that since becoming a disciple of the Buddha, he has never consciously destroyed any form of life.

On the spiritual strength of this solemn declaration [asseveration or *saccakiriya / satyak kriyā*], the monk Angulimala wishes well to a woman in

severe labour pain and to her yet unborn child. The mother and child were forthwith comforted and safeguarded. The origin of this is traced back to the Buddha himself who is said to have promoted it. Note that it was originally not meant to be a child-delivery chant. Let us use it for something more than that. Definitely for the greater purpose of pregnancy care.

Today we make the loving chanting of this solemn declaration a source of comfort and security to pregnant mothers at all stages of their pregnancy. [At our Narada Center, we do this every first Sunday of the month, at 9.00 a.m. We have done this for more than two years now and have blessed and comforted more than one hundred mothers. Some have had even two babies under our care. The text of this chant, together with its translation in English and Sinhala, can be freely had from us.]

What a wonderful opportunity we humans get through this little act of pregnancy care for the pre-natal grooming of the mind of the yet unborn child? We know how receptive the twenty-week child in the mother's womb is to external sounds. The text of this continually repeated loving chant **is essentially the honestly avowed respect for life**. And no more. What a culture for the yet unborn humans. What more does the world or mankind need today?

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